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Can State and Regional Efforts Change Local Land Use Planning and Reduce Sprawl?

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Policy Issue

California's SB 375 creates new expectations for the performance of land use. The law tasks regional Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) with developing land use strategies that, when paired with supportive transportation investments, will reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. A fundamental challenge with this approach is that in California (as with many other states) land use authority is held by local governments, not MPOs. Individual cities and counties make the final decision when it comes to how land development occurs and whether it might reduce or intensify automobile reliance.

SB 375 highlights the complex relationship between upstream land use policy and downstream impacts. It raises salient questions regarding the ability of state or regionally crafted policies to influence local land use plans, policies, and outcomes; and how to observe policy impact and land use change over time.

What the Literature Tells Us

The effectiveness of state and regional policies to reduce sprawl is mixed. There is a sizable literature examining the effectiveness of state efforts to shape land use, local plans, implementation activities, and ultimately the development that follows. Unfortunately, the evidence is inconclusive when it comes to identifying which of the many state policy mechanisms are most effective. Where state policies have been found to moderate land

consumption, they do so at the margins. One approach states have taken is designating targeted development zones, which does appear to make development in these areas somewhat more likely but does not necessarily prevent development from going to other areas. Also, state policies mandating that local plans be consistent with state goals appear to improve the quality of plans but do not necessarily reduce sprawl.

Regionally organized efforts to influence local land use are increasing but less common (and less studied) than state or local efforts. Most evidence on regional smart growth or urban containment initiatives is indirect and suggests modest influence over land use outcomes.

Researchers have employed various frameworks for evaluating land use policies but rarely examine policy implementation. Evaluations of local land use planning and policy have focused on planning outcomes that are largely process-oriented. Studies in this vein focus less on empirically observable plan or policy impacts, and more on the quality of planning, plans, and plan policies. Plan quality studies use content analysis to score plans numerically along key dimensions. Higher plan quality is generally demonstrated when plans provide more detailed information (fact bases) and policy goals include strong, implementation- or action-oriented recommendations. Plan or policy "stringency" is another approach evaluating the extensiveness and restrictiveness of land use regulation.

Policy goal-driven frameworks evaluate land use plans and regulations for their ability to reflect specific policy goals. This approach awards a plan points for articulating policies reflecting desired principles and for suggesting or requiring specific implementation strategies. A goal-driven framework could inform key evaluation needs under SB 375, given California's explicit aim to reduce VMT and GHG emissions.

Implementation based frameworks are used less frequently but promise critical insights on the relationship between policies, plan, and outcomes. Studies of plan implementation face empirical and methodological challenges, including absent consensus among the research community on how to define, observe or measure the success of plan implementation. Empirical, large sample, quantitative studies of plan implementation are rare. Further, multi-causality makes it hard to definitively attribute on-the-ground development to land use plans or policies when other influential factors may be at play.

Recommendations and Reflections

Strategic and ongoing evaluation of land use change is needed. Where state, regional or local governments seek to influence land use and development through policy, there exists both need and opportunity to monitor resulting land use changes. This need is particularly urgent in California, where state law pins the achievement of GHG reduction goals to changes in local land use and development patterns. Existing literature gaps suggest both the need for this monitoring effort and its potential contribution

to knowledge about relationships between higher level policy (crafted by states, regions, or local governments); intermediate plans (land use plans, zoning ordinances, and development decisions subsequently adopted by local government); and ultimate outcomes, observed and measured in on-the-ground changes in land development. Such evaluation would examine two main questions at regular intervals. First, is upstream regional and local planning changing? Here, evidence from land use plans, zoning ordinances, and development policies will be informative. Second, are downstream development patterns changing? If so, how? What on-the-ground land use changes are observable? Do they support reduced auto use?

More work is needed to identify which data could best support statewide monitoring of land use change. Existing studies employ many different data sources and variables to evaluate changes in land use, urban form, and transportation accessibility over time. Available studies are a starting point, but a separate effort is needed to identify the data best able to support statewide monitoring of land use change.

Further Reading

This policy brief is drawn from the full white paper, "Measuring Land Use Performance: Policy, Plan, and Outcome" authored by Gian-Claudia Sciara, which can be found at: ncst.ucdavis.edu/white-paper/ucd-ct-to-wp4-3

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